

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: ALBERT SPEER

a candid conversation with the best-selling author of "inside the third reich," hitler's closest confidant and second-in-command

At the stroke of midnight on September 30, 1966, the giant iron gates of Berlin's Spandau prison creaked open and a tall, silver-haired man walked uncertainly out into the glare of flashbulbs and TV floodlights. Prisoner number five of the four-power-administered penitentiary greeted his wife without visible emotion, shook hands cordially with the governor of the Spandau district and spoke briefly to the press, first in German and then in fluent French and English. "My sentence was just," he said quietly. "We were treated correctly and properly the whole time. I have no complaints." He turned and walked with his wife to a waiting car. Rudolf Hess, Adolf Hitler's executive secretary, now 77, lay inside alone in his cell—Spandau's only remaining prisoner—as Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, friend and second-in-command throughout World War Two, sped off to freedom after 20 years' imprisonment.

There were many who felt that his sentence had been too lenient. It has been estimated that Speer, as Hitler's gifted minister of armaments and war production, was almost singlehandedly responsible for prolonging the Nazi war effort by almost two years. In the spring of 1944, the London Observer wrote, "Speer is . . . more important for Germany

today than Hitler, Himmler, Goering, Goebbels or the generals. They all have, in a way, become the . . . auxiliaries of the man who actually directs the giant power machine."

After Germany's unconditional surrender, Speer was arrested by the Allies and tried before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, along with 21 other surviving Nazi leaders. He was charged with having brought more than 5,000,000 slave laborers to the Reich, "many of them under terrible conditions of cruelty and suffering." To the fury of his codefendants, the opposition of his own lawyer and the surprise of the judges, Speer accepted full responsibility for the most telling count against him: the forced-labor charges. On September 30, 1946, he was found not guilty on two counts of the indictment relating to conspiracy to initiate aggressive war, but was convicted on crimes-against-humanity charges, although the court took note of such extenuating circumstances as his efforts to provide better food, clothing and housing for the forced laborers and his defiance of Hitler in the last year of the war. Overriding Russian demands for the death penalty, the court sentenced Speer to 20 years' imprisonment and he was transported to Spandau prison.

He settled down to the harsh regimen of prison life with surprising adaptability; but as the years dragged on and his children grew older, Speer began to become concerned about their assessment of his role in the Third Reich. Would they despise him as a mass murderer—or would a sense of misplaced loyalty pervert their filial devotion into neo-Nazi political sympathies? Speer realized that he must somehow try to explain to them why and how he had become involved with Hitler and the Nazi movement, and in greater length and detail than he was permitted in his two single-page monthly letters. That need to explain—if not to justify—was the origin of his memoirs. As he wrote successive installments over the long years of imprisonment, Speer's own thinking was altered in subtle but pervasive ways. His only escape was through reading, and he began to pore over volumes of history, philosophy, theology, psychology and sociology. "In 1945, my book would have been different," he says now. "I was only technically educated. But in Spandau, I read Freud, Jung, Adler, Barth, Buber. I was another man in 1966 from the man I was in 1945."

When the gates of Spandau swung



"There was an ultimate coldness about Hitler. I never met anyone else with whom I felt this sense of something missing, this impression that at the core of his being there was just a deadness."

"At Nuremberg, I saw one photograph of a Jewish family being led to the gas chamber. I couldn't rid my mind of it. I would see it in my cell at night. I see it still. It has made a desert of my life."

"So many people expect me to offer justifications for what I did. I cannot. There is no apology or excuse I can ever make. The blood is on my hands. I have not tried to wash it off—only to see it."

open to that other man in 1966, he had already written the first draft of his memoirs, over 2000 manuscript pages. Originally, he had designed them solely as a personal testament to his children but as the final form of the manuscript took shape in the year following his release, he came to feel that others besides his family could benefit from his experiences. He talked it over with each of his children, "since they would have to live with it," and delegated to them veto power over publication. But all agreed that Speer's memoirs should see print.

Upon publication in Germany, the book was an instant best seller and has already sold over 200,000 copies in the German edition. Rapidly translated into a dozen languages, "Inside the Third Reich" has soared to the top of the best-seller lists in the United States, England and western Europe and precipitated both lavish critical praise and bitter controversy. Writing in *The Nation*, Lincoln Kirstein predicted that "Inside the Third Reich" "may, in its somber logic, be the prose masterpiece from World War Two," and in a review in *The Wall Street Journal*, critic Frank Gannon suggested that, "At its deepest level," Speer's memoirs define "20th Century Western man's dilemma and potential in a way that Saint Augustine and Rousseau did for their own times when they wrote their confessions . . . a staggering and monumental book." And Thomas Mann's son Golo, in a German review praising Speer's honesty in confronting his own guilt, declared: "Speer consecrated himself to self-accusation as he had consecrated himself to serving Hitler; such a man does not do things by halves."

But while no critics doubted the intensity of Speer's mea culpas, a few reviewers challenged their integrity. According to this view, Speer's acceptance of personal responsibility for the crimes of the Reich is more propaganda than penitence, a cynical device to disarm his critics and justify both himself and the majority of Germans who supported Hitler. In a devastating essay in *The New York Review of Books*, historian Geoffrey Barraclough not only cast doubt on the sincerity of Speer's repentance but also accused him of doctoring the statistics of his own ministry in order to put "the whole story of German war production in a falsely dramatic light." Barraclough warns against the growth of what he terms the "Speer legend," fostered by uncritical book reviewers and savants ignorant of the realities of the Third Reich. "The picture the Speer legend presents," he concludes, "both of Speer himself and of the regime he served, is a distorted picture."

To evaluate the origins and outlines

of the Speer legend, and to probe the complexities and contradictions of Speer's own character, *PLAYBOY* sent Eric Norden to interview the 66-year-old ex-Reich minister in his pleasant timbered villa on a wooded hill overlooking the Neckar River, three miles from the picturesque university town of Heidelberg. Norden writes of their meeting:

"Speer greeted me amiably and escorted me into the richly furnished living room of his spacious home. He was still handsome in a distinguished, company-director manner, and his beetling black eyebrows reminded me of the younger man I had seen in photographs strolling through occupied Paris with his friend and patron, Adolf Hitler. As we sat over Scotch and sodas by a roaring fire, snow began to fall lightly outside and his three-year-old Saint Bernard, Bello, snored contentedly at her master's feet as Speer's attractive wife, Margarethe, served us heaping plates of home-baked cakes and rich German pastries.

"The atmosphere was so relaxed and gemütlich that, for a moment, I forgot I was speaking to the man who throughout the Second World War had stood second in the Third Reich only to Adolf Hitler, the man whose organizational talents and energies had contributed immeasurably to the death and suffering of millions. He appeared just another upper-middle-class German fond of playing the country squire on his escapes from the board room. As we talked, two of his grandchildren, pig-tailed little Kinder of three and four, played noisily in an adjoining room, and Speer spread his hands helplessly and shrugged in the gesture of harassed but indulgent grandparents everywhere.

"For six weeks, I had studied this man, poring over his book and published interviews, as well as the voluminous reviews and polemical articles in the American and European press. But as I leaned forward to switch on the tape recorder, I felt no closer to the real man behind the public façade than I ever had. I had been frustrated throughout my research by a certain vague opacity, an insubstantiality, about Speer; and as we began talking, I experienced some of the same doubts I had had while reading his book and studying his published statements: As forthright as he appeared on the surface, there seemed to me to be a veil drawn between him and the truth.

"I suspected, as some reviewers had, that the litany of his self-recrimination was in itself an evasion of ultimate responsibility. Now, as I began the interview—which was to extend into almost ten days of relentless day-and-night question-and-answer sessions, ending with both Speer and myself on the brink of exhaustion—this uneasiness persisted, intensified at first by his curiously detached

manner. As my interrogations proceeded late into that night and resumed over breakfast the next morning, I began to realize that what disturbed me most about Speer was his tranquillity, the way in which he could accuse himself of terrible crimes in the same tone he would use to offer me a piece of Apfel Torte.

"But as I listened to Speer recount the terrors and triumphs of the Third Reich in German and the fluent English he learned in Spandau, as I saw the patient concern with which he tried to express and explain himself and his era in the course of our tiring sessions, I realized that this interview and all his other confrontations with press and public were part of the burden he bore, part of his penance—way stations to a salvation he himself recognized as unattainable." Norden began the interview by asking Speer about the harsh judgment of his critics.

PLAYBOY: Critical acclaim for *Inside the Third Reich* has not been universal. Rebecca West, dismissing the book as a cynical whitewash, brands you a "repulsive criminal," and historian Gudrun Tempel writes that "Speer may easily have been as brutal, as ruthlessly ambitious and almost as sick as Hitler . . . one puts his book away with a greater fear of men like him than of any Hitler." How would you respond to such critics?

SPEER: Perhaps they are right. After what I have done, it is not for me to call them wrong. But I think many reviewers, including those who liked the book, miss the point when they place their emphasis on me as an individual. My guilt can never be erased, nor should it be, but that guilt is only the frame for a larger picture. I wrote the memoirs to describe and explain what happened from 1933 to 1945 and to warn people so that it will not happen again, in Germany or anywhere else. I suppose that in a personal sense, it was also an attempt to understand myself, to see how and why I could have been a part of such things. But so many people seem to expect me to offer justifications for what I did. I cannot. There is no apology or excuse I can ever make. The blood is on my hands. I have not tried to wash it off—only to see it.

PLAYBOY: At Nuremberg, you accepted responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich. But did you then, and do you now, consider yourself personally responsible?

SPEER: Yes, for everything that happened. For the forced labor, obviously—that was directly under my jurisdiction. But I was also responsible for acts about which I knew nothing at the time they were committed, such as the atrocities against the Jews and the mass executions of Russian civilians and prisoners of war. There was no way, legally or

morally, for me to evade this guilt. I took that position at the Nuremberg trial, although there was a great temptation to try to save my life by mitigating guilt, by offering excuses, by blaming others, by claiming I was only obeying orders. But whenever I wavered, I would think of the mass of evidence presented before the tribunal—the photographs and testimony and documents about what had happened. In particular, there was one photograph of a Jewish family going to its death, a husband with his wife and children being led to the gas chamber. I couldn't rid my mind of that photograph; I would see it in my cell at night. I see it still. It has made a desert of my life. But also, in a strange way, it freed me. When you finally comprehend that you have devoted 15 years of your life to building a graveyard, the only thing left is to accept responsibility for your actions. From that moment of recognition, I felt for the first time in my life a sense of inner calm.

PLAYBOY: It's strange to hear such passionate sentiment from the second most powerful man in Nazi Germany. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who interrogated you at Nuremberg, conceded that you were a "civilized, sensitive, intelligent man," but said he failed to comprehend how you could "so long and so faithfully serve, at such close quarters, such vulgar tyranny." Do you have an answer?

SPEER: No. I have been living with the question for 25 years and I have found many reasons—but no adequate reply. Of course, for a while, I tried to soothe my conscience with pseudo truths, rationalizations that would make me look better to myself. I tried to persuade myself that, in a totalitarian system such as Nazi Germany, a man's isolation increases as his position rises and he is not aware of crimes committed by underlings. I would tell myself that, in this modern technological age, genocide becomes an assembly-line process, with the number of murdered rising even as the number of murderers decreases, that under such circumstances, it is easy to be ignorant. I argued that in such a system, the mania for secrecy is self-justifying and self-perpetuating and, therefore, I could not be blamed for not knowing what happened. In each of those arguments, there is a considerable measure of objective truth. But in the larger moral sense, they are all lies, evasions of my responsibility as a human being. If I was isolated, I determined the degree of my own isolation. If I was ignorant, I ensured my own ignorance. If I did not see, it was because I did not want to see.

PLAYBOY: Trevor-Roper writes, "It is this remarkable contrast between perception and blindness, between sensitivity and insensitivity, between moral standards and moral neutrality, which makes Speer

psychologically so interesting." And, to some critics, so frightening. What accounted for this moral schizophrenia?

SPEER: The answer is not pleasant for me to contemplate, because it is so banal. I was blinded by the glory and authority of my position, by the great plans I was making, the great events I helped to shape. It was a classic case of *hubris*, the affliction of the ancient Greeks. I stood at the pinnacle of power and I was intoxicated by the distant landscapes I saw—while all the time a charnel house reeked at my feet. My own pride and ambition made me an accomplice in the extermination of millions of human beings.

PLAYBOY: An extermination you did nothing to prevent and—by successfully prolonging the war as armaments minister—actually assisted.

SPEER: I could not have prevented it short of assassinating Hitler before his "final solution" was under way, and at that time, I had neither the courage nor the vision to do so. But it was my duty to confront it, to assert my individual and collective responsibility for it. That was my greatest failure. From the very beginning, I should have seen where Hitler's hatred of the Jews would lead. But slowly, at first almost imperceptibly, I accommodated myself to his mania. When I first joined the party, I viewed Hitler's anti-Semitism with distaste but thought it was just a cheap propaganda weapon that he would abandon when he came to power. Once Hitler was in office and unleashed the full power of the state against the Jews—and the Socialists and the Communists and the Freemasons and the Jehovah's Witnesses—I just stood aside and said to myself that as long as I did not personally participate, it had nothing to do with me. I believe there is a saying in English—"We first endure, then pity, then embrace." My toleration of the anti-Semitic campaign made me responsible for it.

PLAYBOY: You've said you weren't an anti-Semite when you joined the party and you write in your book that you had many Jewish friends in your school days. How could you tolerate their persecution?

SPEER: By depersonalizing them. The people who were deprived of their jobs, who were hounded from the professions, whose property was confiscated and who were finally dragged off to the concentration camps gradually became abstractions to me, not human beings with families and aspirations and worries and needs like anyone else. It shames me to admit that these people disappeared from my life and my thoughts as if they had never existed. If I had continued to see them as human beings, I could not have remained a Nazi. I did not hate them; I was indifferent to them. My

crime was far worse because I was not an anti-Semite.

PLAYBOY: You never had any qualms of conscience whatever about the treatment of the Jews?

SPEER: No. As the anti-Semitic campaign escalated, my conscience was progressively calloused and blunted. Of course, one's conscience does not just cease to exist overnight; it is slowly eroded over the years, eaten away day by day, anesthetized by a multiplicity of little crimes. Things that would have shocked and horrified me in 1934, such as the assassination of opposition leaders, the persecution of the Jews, the incarceration and torture of innocent men in concentration camps, I tolerated as unfortunate excesses in 1935; and things I couldn't have stomached in 1935 were palatable a few years later. This happened in one way or another to all of us in Germany. As the Nazi environment enveloped us, its evils grew invisible—because we were part of them.

PLAYBOY: How could a man of your intelligence and sensibility allow himself to remain part of so evil a system, however gradually it enveloped you?

SPEER: There is, unfortunately, no necessary correlation between intelligence and decency; the genius and the moron are equally susceptible to corruption. Almost 200 years ago, Goethe wrote in *Iphigenie auf Tauris* that even "the best man" finally "becomes accustomed to cruelty" and "in the end makes a law of that which he despises." As far as sensibility is concerned, I would have been shocked and outraged if I had seen some hoodlum throw a brick through a Jewish store window in 1930. But on the day after *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the great pogrom in which dozens of synagogues and thousands of Jewish homes and businesses were burned and looted, I strolled by the smoldering ruins of a Berlin synagogue, and my only reaction was to be aesthetically offended by the ruins' spilling over onto the *Fasanenstrasse*. That was all; I was bothered only by the litter. The memory of that day is one of the most painful of my life. What makes it worse is that on *Kristallnacht*, Hitler crossed a Rubicon; barbarous as his treatment of the Jews had been, I don't think even he had contemplated their physical extermination until then. More was shattered than glass that night.

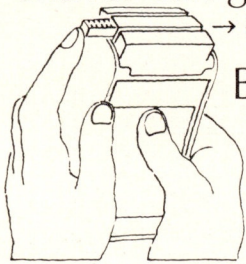
PLAYBOY: When was it finally decided to annihilate the Jews?

SPEER: I am sure Hitler had it in his mind since *Kristallnacht*, but I learned from evidence introduced at Nuremberg that the actual decision was made at the Wannsee Conference in 1942, once he knew the war was going to be total, with either absolute victory or absolute defeat at the end. I think that knowledge eliminated the last remaining

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political and diplomatic restraints and liberated his most terrible instincts. It wasn't a ministerial decision; most of Hitler's government associates, including me, never even knew about it till they were told at the end of the war. Himmler was placed in charge of the extermination program, and his henchmen Eichmann and Kaltenbrunner and Heydrich organized and implemented it. But even within the SS, relatively few people were involved—the top administrators, plus the actual concentration-camp commandants and guards and logistics and transport personnel. I know that many people outside Germany believe that everyone in the country knew of the extermination, but that just wasn't the case, as historians of the period will tell you.

PLAYBOY: Since Hitler's power was absolute, why did he bother to keep his "final solution" secret—if, in fact, it was as secret as you indicate?

SPEER: It was. I think, in a sense, the last residue of humanity in Hitler prevented him from boasting about it to any but his most fanatic and degenerate followers; and then, too, on a more pragmatic level, it's possible he was afraid of the army's reaction if they had learned what was happening. His power was not completely absolute; in the final analysis, he was still dependent on the military. The generals were subservient to Hitler—until the July 20 plot, at any rate—but I doubt if the *Wehrmacht* could have stomached the horrors of Auschwitz. Despite all the crimes in which it tacitly acquiesced, the army still prided itself on possessing a military code of honor which would have prevented it from accepting the wholesale massacre of unarmed men, women and children. But they didn't know until it was too late—too late for the Jews, too late for all of us. In my own case, I did not know what was happening until 1945, when I learned with horror at Nuremberg precisely what monstrous acts our regime had been committing—a horror that has never left me.

PLAYBOY: This is the point that has aroused the greatest suspicion among your critics about your integrity. They argue that you were a member of Hitler's inner circle, by your own admission the closest thing to a friend he ever had. You were intimately involved with all aspects of Nazi military and political strategy. How, they ask, can you expect people to believe that you remained ignorant until the end of the war of the systematic extermination of 6,000,000 Jews—an extermination carried out all around you?

SPEER: I know this is difficult for many people to believe, but I think that if they really understood the machinations of the Nazi state, they would see how it could happen—and did. You must remember that pervasive interdepart-

mental rivalries and a fetish for secrecy affected every aspect of the Nazi state; both major policy decisions and relatively innocuous operations were shrouded in deception and evasion. Everything was compartmentalized; there was a bureaucracy even of murder.

PLAYBOY: But even in a totalitarian state, crimes are committed by *people*—people with families and friends and neighbors who must have been aware of their activities. The extermination of the Jews was on a huge scale, the most massive genocide in the history of man. How *could* it have been kept secret?

SPEER: Before this century, it would have been impossible. But no longer. This is the true horror of the technological age—that a handful of men, in utmost secrecy, have the power by virtually the push of a button to dispatch millions to their deaths. In my own case, there is no way I can avoid responsibility for the extermination of the Jews. I was as much their executioner as Himmler, because they were carried past me to their deaths and I did not see. It is surprisingly easy to blind your moral eyes. I was like a man following a trail of bloodstained footprints through the snow without realizing someone had been injured.

PLAYBOY: But in your capacity as minister of armaments, you traveled all over Germany and the occupied territories, inspecting industrial and military facilities. Do you mean to say that you never came across a concentration camp?

SPEER: Of course I knew there were camps; everyone knew that. It was what was going on in them we did not know. Beatings, perhaps even torture, we knew the Gestapo to be capable of; but systematic mass slaughter—no, in our worst dreams, we could not conceive the reality of that.

PLAYBOY: You were in regular contact with Himmler and his top aides, and yet they never let anything slip and you never attempted to question them?

SPEER: No. I had a chance to find out in the summer of 1944, when I was visited by one of my old friends, Karl Hanke, the gauleiter, or district governor, of Lower Silesia. Hanke was a fanatic Nazi, but he had some lingering human instincts; I remember that he had come back from the Polish and French fronts and spoken with sympathy and concern about the dead and wounded and maimed on both sides. On this occasion, he came into my office and just slumped down into my green-leather armchair and was silent for a long time. There was a strange expression on his face, and when he finally began to speak, he was quite unlike his normal hearty self. He told me he had just visited a concentration camp in Upper Silesia and he urged me in a faltering voice never, under any circumstances whatsoever, to accept an invitation to

inspect that camp. He had seen horrible things there, things he was not allowed to discuss—things he could not bring himself to discuss. I had never seen Hanke in such a state.

PLAYBOY: What did you do?

SPEER: Nothing. There he was, sitting in my office, hinting at things that it was my duty as a minister of the Reich to discover—not to mention my duty as a human being. But I did not question him. I did not question Himmler. I did not question Hitler. I did not speak with any of my friends or acquaintances in the government or party who might have known something; I did not investigate; I did nothing. Hanke, of course, was speaking of Auschwitz. From that point on, I had irrevocably condemned myself. My moral contamination was complete. That moment was very much in my mind when I accepted responsibility for the crimes of the Reich at Nuremberg. It has never left me. Because of my failure at that moment, my utter moral abdication, I still feel directly responsible for Auschwitz in a completely personal sense.

PLAYBOY: The sins you admit were all of omission—not acting on *Kristallnacht*, not eliciting the truth about Auschwitz from Hanke. But what would you have done if you *had* known that 6,000,000 Jewish men, women and children were being exterminated?

SPEER: This is a crucial question, and one I have asked myself many times. The answer does not help me to sleep at night. I *might* have resigned from the government; of that much, at least, I was *capable* even then. But would I have fought, protested, tried to stop the slaughter, risked my life? In all honesty, I must say I doubt it. Looking back over the decades at the man I was then, I can expect no moral courage from him.

PLAYBOY: If Hitler had admitted to you that he was annihilating the Jews, what would you have said to him?

SPEER: That, too, I have asked myself, and the answer is equally dispiriting. I would have said, "You are killing them? That is insane! I need them to work in our factories." That would have been, I am afraid, my first reaction at the time.

PLAYBOY: No moral outrage? No revulsion?

SPEER: The man who left Spandau was not the same man who entered. That other Speer—I hate to think of him as me, but he is me, of course, my *Doppelgänger*—would have thought only in terms of efficiency and the war effort. The killing of the Jews would have seemed to me a waste. A crime, perhaps, if I had thought about it abstractly, but first and foremost a waste. I had no thought other than oiling the war machine. Even with blood.

PLAYBOY: One historian has written that you loved machines more than people. Was he right?

SPEER: Yes. That is why I could serve



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and conquered but as human beings. If I had to draw one single lesson from the horrors of World War Two, it would be not to depersonalize your enemy. Once this happens—whether it is a case of Nazi and Jew, Communist and capitalist or black and white—the greatest crimes are not only feasible but inevitable. The ideological differences that divide mankind today are, when seen in historical perspective, as transient and evanescent as the religious quarrels of the 16th and 17th centuries; the difference is that in the 20th Century, man has the power to totally destroy the race or nation he views as the enemy.

In 1947, I wrote in my cell at Spandau, "The catastrophe of this war has proved the sensitivity of the system of modern civilization evolved in the course of centuries. Now we know that we do not live in an earthquake-proof structure. The build-up of negative impulses, each reinforcing the other, can inexorably shake to pieces the complicated apparatus of the modern world. There is no halting this process by will alone. The danger is that the automatism of progress will depersonalize man further and withdraw more and more of his self-responsibility." It is this vast gulf between our technological potential and our moral development that makes this age both so challenging and so terrifying. We now have the power to reach the stars—and to destroy our own planet.

If Adolf Hitler had possessed a button that would destroy the entire world, he would have pushed it at the end. Today, there are such buttons in the war rooms of all the great powers. None of the world's leaders is a Hitler, but the hatreds and fears on which Hitler thrived still persist, and the potential for mass destruction is even greater today. In the 1970s, an executioner never has to see his victims, whether they number in the hundreds or the thousands or the millions. This was the nightmare of Nazi Germany, the first modern state to mechanize murder. It is also the nightmare of a world of H-bombs and high-altitude jet bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles and chemical-bacteriological warfare. In such a world, terrorized by technology, we are *all* in Auschwitz.

I know that these instruments of death are in the hands of sane men, often decent men, but there were sane and decent men in Nazi Germany and they did not avert the greatest bloodbath in recorded history. The automated juggernaut of modern mass destruction can all too easily achieve a momentum of its own, carrying the world to total annihilation. Once the beast is loosed, it can travel in only one direction. The descent into hell can be an exhilarating ride, but it is a one-way trip. I know I have been there. I still am.



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